UNITED NATIONS

General Assembly

FORTY-SIXTH SESSION

Official Records

FIFTH COMMITTEE
9th meeting
held on
Tuesday, 15 October 1991
at 10 a.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 9th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. MUNTASSER (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya)

Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. MSELLE

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General debate

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91-56546 3947S (E)

Distr. GENERAL
A/C.5/46/SR.9
18 October 1991

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 113: PATTERN OF CONFERENCES (continued) (A/46/32)

1. Mr. IRUMBA (Uganda) said that the Department of Conference Services (DCS) had a special role to play in ensuring that the United Nations fulfilled its primary objective of harmonizing international action through dialogue. The dawning of a new world order made it imperative for Member States to deliberate on actions that would promote the common interest. The timely provision of conference services was of critical importance in that endeavour, which would be frustrated if haphazard deep cuts were made in conference-servicing resources.

2. The availability of adequate and efficiently utilized conference services was the concern of all Member States. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 43/222, the Committee on Conferences should continue to provide the necessary political guidance to all organs or programmes using conference services funded under the regular budget. The primary role of the Committee was to facilitate dialogue between Member States through the provision of adequate conference services; it should not allow allow itself to be used as a vehicle for blocking or frustrating dialogue. In that connection, his delegation reiterated the understanding that had been reached in the adoption of paragraph 4 (c) of resolution 43/222 B that the Committee on Conferences had no budgetary role.

3. His delegation endorsed the recommendation in paragraph 29 of the Committee's report that the General Assembly should request subsidiary organs to review their meeting requirements. Every effort should be made to complete meetings within the scheduled timetable, although, it might in some instances be necessary to authorize additional meetings in order to enable a committee to complete its work. Undue complaints had been made concerning such legitimate requests. Member States should ensure that the interests of all were met, and not allow the use of a cut-off date for meetings to defer decisions that might not be of interest to some delegations, but that were of critical importance to others.

4. His own delegation had consistently stressed the importance of summary records for the efficient conduct of business. While it might be expedient to eliminate summary records as a means of reducing costs, such a step should not be construed as desirable or as promoting efficiency. At the forty-fifth session, his delegation had called for a study of the impact on efficiency of not providing summary records; it hoped that the study would be completed prior to the forty-seventh session. In the meantime, he remained unpersuaded by the rationale employed in denying several subsidiary bodies summary records. In that connection, he welcomed Economic and Social Council decision 1991/295, which called for a review of the question of summary records of all its subsidiary bodies at its 1992 regular session. It was his understanding that that decision superseded the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 62 of its report.

(Mr. Irumba, Uganda)

5. The 32-page limit for reports should continue to be applied with flexibility. With regard to biennialization, his delegation had always been sceptical of the claim that it improved efficiency. In fact, biennialization simply reduced the opportunity available to Member States to engage in dialogue on major issues. For example, the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme had been pressured to biennialize its work, but had been compelled to establish a Committee of Permanent Representatives to meet in its absence, and that Committee itself required conference services. The biennialization of meetings might be expedient, but was not desirable; in any event, it was a matter to be decided upon by the organ concerned. It was from that perspective that his delegation viewed the recommendation contained in paragraph 14 of the report of the Committee on Conferences.

6. With regard to inter-sessional departures from the approved calendar of conferences, the Committee's recommendations in paragraphs 77 (b) (v) and 138 of its report should ensure that all members of the Committee were notified of any such proposals which had programme budget implications.

7. With respect to the provision of conference services for organs and programmes under the regular budget, it should be noted that the bodies concerned were mainly involved in development activities. His delegation cautioned against the attempt to redirect the resources of those bodies from development to the conference servicing of their meetings. In order to ensure the continued concentration on field activities, conference services for the bodies concerned should continue to be financed under the regular budget.

8. With regard to exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243, his delegation had serious reservations concerning the last sentence of paragraph 101 of the report of the Committee on Conferences, in view of its far-reaching implications. As had been said, the dictatorship of the few was as unacceptable as the tyranny of the majority. The approach referred to in paragraph 101 had been used, for example, to paralyse the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean.

9. His delegation welcomed improvements in the methodology for evaluating the use of conference-servicing resources, as called for in General Assembly resolution 45/238 A. It should be noted, however, that meetings sometimes needed to be suspended for consultations so that a decision could be reached.

10. He shared the view of the Committee on Conferences that timeliness in the issuance of documentation had a major impact on both utilization and planning accuracy, and endorsed the inclusion in the methodology of a new indicator on timeliness of documentation. While his delegation noted the increase in the average utilization rate to 78 per cent, it thought that failure to include certain crucial factors, such as timeliness, rendered the methodology unreliable, and that undue importance should therefore not be attached to it. In that connection he urged the Secretariat to adhere to the six-week rule on the issuance of documentation.

(Mr. Irumba, Uganda)

11. Commenting on the application of new technology to conference servicing, he stressed the importance of the balanced application of new technology throughout the system, including the regional commissions. In particular, less developed countries should be given access to technology introduced in the area of conference services. He would welcome an indication of progress in improving conference services at the Economic Commission for Africa, called for in General Assembly resolution 45/248 B (sect. II. paras. 5 and 6).

12. His delegation recognized the importance of conference services in the work of the United Nations and commended the staff of DCS for their dedication, despite the financial strains to which the Department had been subjected. He trusted that the Department's problems would be addressed in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993.

13. Mr. THIRUNAGARAN (Singapore) said that his delegation supported the introduction of computer-based technology in order to improve the Organization's efficiency, on the understanding that it was applied evenly throughout the system. Given the inherent expense, only tried and tested technology should be employed. The Organization should undertake a long-term analysis of manpower savings attributable to new technology. His delegation was concerned by the fact that the computer systems in use at UNDP were apparently not fully compatible. Failure to achieve full integration would mean more work and higher costs in the maintenance of systems, while failure to take compatibility into account would make it more difficult to integrate systems later on. He asked what steps the Organization had taken to entrust the introduction of new technologies to a centralized authority.

14. Mr. DANKWA (Chairman of the Committee on Conferences) said that, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 43/222 B, the Committee on Conferences was required to recommend a draft calendar designed to meet the needs of the United Nations and to ensure the optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources. The understanding of the General Assembly was that the Committee on Conferences had no authority under that resolution to override decisions on meetings decided upon by legislative organs. In the light of those legislative limitations, any allegation that the Committee was ineffective would seem to be misplaced. Related to the authority of the Committee on Conferences was the question of the methodology for assessing the utilization of conference-servicing resources. The Committee had recognized the imperfections of the current methodology and was experimenting with a new methodology for a three-year period, beginning in 1990.

15. The Committee had reviewed 43 sessions of intergovernmental bodies held in 1990, of which 29 had had a utilization factor at or above the 75 per cent benchmark figure. The Assembly should consider how the remaining bodies could be encouraged to reach that benchmark.

16. With regard to requests by subsidiary organs to meet during regular sessions of the Assembly, he said that the Committee had authorized eight such

bodies to meet at Headquarters during the forty-sixth session. Three other organs had also informed the Committee of their need to meet periodically during the year, including during the General Assembly, to monitor developments in their areas of competence. The Committee had reviewed each request from the standpoint of feasibility. Circumstances could require subsidiary organs to meet during the General Assembly, but the Committee had advised the organs concerned to re-evaluate their work programmes so that routine meetings could be accommodated earlier in the year. It did not seek to limit access to conference services, but had to make judgements as to the need for exceptions. Accordingly, the recommendations in its report also gave general guidance on ways of avoiding disruption of the meetings programme. In short, the Committee had made an expert analysis of each request, taking into account its own mandate and the mandates of the subsidiary bodies concerned.

17. The Committee had taken a similar approach in its examination of requests for the extension of regular sessions. Four such requests had been approved in 1991, from the Commission on Transnational Corporations, the UNDP Governing Council, the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC), and ACABQ. Since none of the sessions in question had been concluded, the paramount consideration had been how best to accommodate the requests. For example, it would have been irresponsible of the Committee to deny CPC a three-day extension only for the Organization to incur the additional expenditure of another session, probably of one week, in order for CPC to complete its work.

18. It had also been suggested that the Committee on Conferences could hold one substantive session every two years, but that might result in a session lasting longer than the total current number of meetings. Any such change would also affect the Committee's terms of reference, which required it to report annually to the General Assembly, as well as the annual rotation of its membership. The suggestion therefore seemed premature.

19. The call for a fresh outside look at DCS had come about because the Department's proposals in such matters as its programme budget had been handled within the Department and the Secretariat without consideration by a supervisory intergovernmental organ. DCS had issued an informal paper summarizing comments made on the subject at the forty-fourth session of the General Assembly, when several delegations had supported the view that a leading role could be played by the Committee on Conferences and that perhaps a working group could be set up for the purpose. The Committee on Conferences had now determined that its mandate from the General Assembly enabled it to play such a supervisory role and it had defined its place in the review as the intergovernmental "parent" to DCS. The Department would thus benefit from the type of review of its programme which other Secretariat units received in CPC. The Committee had decided to review the Department as and when necessary. As an initial step it had examined the documents on programme performance, the programme budget and the medium-term plan. It had also listed, in paragraph 123 of its report, the areas indicated by the Secretariat which might require further review. The need for a fresh outside look had

(Mr. Dankwa)

thus been largely met by the Committee. In order to set the record straight, a corrigendum would be issued concerning the wording of paragraph 124 of the Committee's report.

20. He wished to place on record his gratitude to the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments and his staff for the cooperation which they had extended to him, and he thanked the members of the Fifth Committee for their well-placed interest in the work of the Committee on Conferences.

21. Mr. WYZNER (Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments) said that DCS remained fully committed to the revitalization and reform process initiated five years earlier by the Group of High-level Intergovernmental Experts (Group of 18). In that process it had consistently followed the guidance of the Committee on Conferences, whose mandate included ensuring "optimum utilization of conference facilities and services". It was also committed to the review of conference services proposed by the Secretary-General in his final report on the implementation of resolution 41/213 (A/44/222) and had therefore welcomed the 1989 decision of the Committee on Conferences to play a role in the review. It was heartening that at the forty-fourth session members of the Fifth Committee had called for the Committee on Conferences to play a leading and vital role in the review. DCS had worked with the Committee on Conferences to determine the areas to be studied.

22. In addition to the Committee on Conferences, a number of other external entities had also carried out reviews of DCS, making the Department one of the most scrutinized in the Secretariat. It had been the subject of 12 studies by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) and was ready to cooperate with JIU in updating those studies or undertaking new ones, as a number of delegations had suggested. In addition, there had been six management studies conducted by the Management Advisory Service and numerous inspections by internal and external auditors, including comprehensive departmental audits during both the current and the previous biennium. The Department had also employed consultants on such subjects as the sale of publications and technological innovations projects. Such outside studies had proved very useful in specific areas of technological innovation and would be continued within the limited resources.

23. All those reviews had been complemented by studies made by the General Assembly, through ACABQ and the Fifth Committee, of such matters as the unification of conference services at Vienna, the implementation of the optical disk project, the printing requirements of the Organization, the review of language services in the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and the DCS-related parts of the Secretary-General's reports on the implementation of resolution 41/213 and the technological innovations programme.

(Mr. Wyzner)

24. ACABQ had requested a report - which had been submitted by the Secretary-General in 1990 - on the impact of the new technologies on the workload standards for conference-servicing staff. ACABQ had originally addressed a request to the Secretary-General for workload and other data to be used in estimating the financial implications of meetings, and the establishment of uniform conference-servicing staffing requirements for meetings had led to what were now commonly called "workload standards". In 1990 the General Assembly had raised workload standards for word-processing staff by 30 per cent and had established standards for reproduction staff at New York and Geneva. It had noted, in resolution 45/248 A, that the revised workload standards reflected a further step towards enhanced productivity of conference-servicing staff, including improvements achieved through the application of new technologies. Conference-servicing staff was the only group in the Organization which had workload standards reviewed and approved by ACABQ and the General Assembly.

25. The Department had also submitted to the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) a proposal for developing workload standards for the whole United Nations system. The Meeting had established a working group for that purpose, and the Secretariat would report on the results to the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) and to the General Assembly at its next session.

26. A number of delegations had expressed interest in the impact of the technological innovations programme on the Department's work, and the representative of Uganda had just asked about proposals for ECA. On that specific point, a report was being prepared in response to resolution 45/248; in addition to the technological innovations programme, discussions were under way concerning the training of translators at ECA, and a report would be submitted to ACABQ. The question of the compatibility of computer systems, which the representative of Singapore had just raised, would again be addressed in a report on the optical disk project to be submitted to ACABQ and the Fifth Committee. The Department was very concerned about the issue and was seeking to ensure that its computer systems were compatible with all others. The matter had also been dealt with at recent sessions of IAMLADP.

27. As well as enhancing the quality of services, the technological innovations had led to a reduction in the level of resources required. For example, staffing resources in text-processing units had been cut by 59 posts, or 20 per cent of the staffing complement, by the end of 1989, with 8 per cent of that reduction having been achieved before the Group of 18 had submitted its recommendations; furthermore, temporary assistance for the General Assembly had been reduced from 81 to 48 posts, or by more than 40 per cent, by the same date.

28. Technological innovations had also produced substantial savings in materials. For example, the installation of the automated plate-making system in the reproduction facilities had made it possible to save some $100,000 per

(Mr. Wyzner)

biennium in paper and related supplies, abolish three General Service posts, and increase productivity by some 50 million page impressions. Similarly, the further development of an in-house electronic typesetting capacity and of the electronic production of cartographic materials and colour work and covers for publications had resulted in a meaningful decrease in the use of external typesetting and printing services in New York.

29. Accordingly, where technological innovations had been introduced in a comprehensive manner, their impact on cost-efficiency was striking. Conversely, where the computer base was either non-existent or limited, gains in cost-efficiency were less likely to occur. In that connection, table 1 in the report of the Secretary-General on the status of technological innovations in the United Nations (A/C.5/46/1/Corr.1) indicated an average ratio of 0.66 personal computers to posts at Headquarters. The ratio of 0.41 for DCS was well below the Headquarters average. Clearly, the gains achievable through the introduction of technology demanded an investment in the technology itself and in training to optimize its use.

30. The Department was grateful for the Committee's continued support for, and interest in, its work and would take into account all the comments that had been made during the debate. It remained committed to pursuing the goals set for conference services.

31. Mr. NASSER (Egypt) said that the point made by his delegation in regard to the examination by the Committee on Conferences of related sections of the proposed programme budget had been overlooked. While his delegation was not opposed to the Committee having a role in the budgetary process, it would note that the Committee's mandate was defined in General Assembly resolution 43/222 B. An integral part of that resolution was the understanding that nothing in the resolution should be conceived as giving the Committee power to override decisions on programmes or meetings or to play a budgetary role. The feeling of the majority had been that until the General Assembly decided otherwise, the Committee on Conferences should work within the limits set by the General Assembly in the resolution. His question, therefore, had been whether the Committee's examination of sections of the proposed programme budget was consistent with the terms of resolution 43/222 B. He believed that it deserved an answer and hoped that the general debate would not be regarded as concluded until one had been provided.

32. Mr. ETUKET (Uganda) said that his delegation associated itself fully with the comments of the Egyptian delegation. He thanked the Under-Secretary-General for his explanation of the point raised by his delegation in connection with section II, paragraphs 5 and 6, of General Assembly resolution 45/248 B. He noted that his delegation had stressed the importance of ensuring that the application of new technology was of benefit to all countries, in particular the least developed. It was important that the least developed countries should be enabled to use whatever technology was adopted in the Department of Conference Services. He hoped that that aspect of the matter would be addressed.

33. Mr. SPAANS (Netherlands), speaking on behalf of the Twelve States members of the European Community, noted that a corrigendum would be issued to paragraph 124 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/46/32). The Twelve had made particular reference to that paragraph in their statement, pointing out that no further information had been provided on the plan to invite a "fresh outside look". They would appreciate an explanation from the Under-Secretary-General.

34. Mr. DANKWA (Chairman of the Committee on Conferences) said that the corrigendum to paragraph 124 was intended merely to make the wording conform to the text agreed on by the Committee and introduced no change of substance.

35. Although the request of the Netherlands delegation had been addressed to the Under-Secretary-General, he would like to comment on it himself. It was true that the Twelve had expressed the hope that a report would be issued, but that hope was simply an expression of the views of a group of Member States. The Secretariat, or any intergovernmental body, took action on the basis of resolutions or decisions. The General Assembly, in resolution 44/196 A, had not asked the Secretary-General to publish the results of the review of the Department of Conference Services but had, rather, invited the Committee on Conferences to play a role in it.

36. In response to the point made by the representative of Egypt, he read out the understanding which had been attached to General Assembly resolution 43/222 B, according to which nothing in paragraph 4 (c) of that draft resolution should be construed as giving the Committee on Conferences any role in the budgetary process or authority to override decisions on programmes and on meetings and conferences duly decided upon by legislative organs of the United Nations. The terms of reference set out in paragraph 4 (c), however, needed to be interpreted in the light of the regulations governing programme planning, monitoring and evaluation adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 37/234. The procedure was the following: an intergovernmental body made a recommendation to the General Assembly in plenary meeting; if adopted, it was then formulated in terms of a resolution or decision; that resolution or decision was converted by the Secretariat into a programme; the programme was then reviewed by an intergovernmental body, under the rules governing programming, to make sure that it properly reflected the resolution or decision in question; it was then examined by CPC, which had an opportunity to coordinate all programmes, looking at them from a larger perspective and, among other things, reducing duplication; lastly, the programme went before ACABQ, which examined its costing.

37. Section 32 of the proposed programme budget, which was a services programme, although the services were rooted in the decisions of various intergovernmental organs, was not reviewed by CPC and the Committee on Conferences had realized that it could play a useful role by ensuring that it reflected the decisions of the various intergovernmental bodies concerned. That role came well within its terms of reference, as set forth in paragraph 4 (a) of resolution 43/222 B, whereby it was to advise the General

(Mr. Dankwa)

Assembly on all matters pertaining to the organization of conferences in the United Nations. He stressed once again that there was no duplication or any departure from the understanding attached to the resolution. The Committee on Conferences was not seeking any budgetary role: the costing of the programme remained the province of ACABQ.

38. The reference to the introduction of new technologies evenly throughout the United Nations, in paragraph 135 of the Committee's report (A/46/32), was intended to convey that, given the basic fact that resources were limited, it was important to avoid a disproportionate amount of those resources being channelled to a single unit.

39. Mr. SPAANS (Netherlands) said that the Twelve would appreciate an answer to their question from the Under-Secretary-General himself.

40. Mr. WYZNER (Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments) said that he endorsed the reply given by the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences on his behalf and had refrained from adding to it in order to save the Committee's time. He believed, however, that a probable source of the misunderstanding he detected lay in the use of the word "outside". To the Netherlands delegation, "outside" might have meant outside the United Nations, something coming from the "outside world". To the Secretariat, and especially to the Department of Conference Services, "outside" meant outside the Department itself. Thus, to his own Department, the Fifth Committee, the Committee on Conferences, the Joint Inspection Unit, and the Management Advisory Service were all "outside" bodies. In addition to the role played by the Committee on Conferences, more than 20 studies had been carried out in the period in question with the full cooperation of DCS, twelve by the Joint Inspection Unit, six by the Management Advisory Service and several by ACABQ, all of which, in the Department's view, offered an "outside" look.

41. The CHAIRMAN announced that the general debate on the pattern of conferences was concluded.

AGENDA ITEM 107: PROPOSED PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1992-1993 (continued) (A/46/6/Rev.1 and A/46/7)

AGENDA ITEM 108: PROGRAMME PLANNING (continued) (A/46/16 and Add.1, A/46/173 and A/46/330)

General debate

42. Mr. KÄÄRIA (Finland), speaking on behalf of the five Nordic countries, noted that the United Nations had relied increasingly in recent years on voluntary funding to finance its activities. The net regular budget of $1.96 billion for the next biennium was small in relation to the enormous tasks that the Organization was expected to undertake. To put it in

(Mr. Kääria, Finland)

perspective, the regular budget for one year was approximately equal to the annual budget for UNICEF, or less than 2 per cent of the annual value of global exports of major weapons. Yet financing it remained a problem and the situation was now worse than it had been a decade earlier. The absence of any viable system of reserves had jeopardized the functioning of the Organization. It was intolerable that member countries were not prepared to finance the costs of United Nations activities. The Nordic delegations shared both the Secretary-General's concern about the gravity of the situation and his view on the need to find a permanent solution to the problem of the timely payment of assessed contributions. They also believed that the question of adequate reserves should be addressed at the current session.

43. The Nordic countries accepted the rate of real growth calculated for the regular budget for 1992-1993 and considered that the budget proposals accorded well with the priorities approved by the General Assembly. However, ACABQ had recommended that the proposed expenditures should be cut by $43.4 million, or almost 2 per cent. There was always room for rationalization and savings in any big administration, for example, by the more effective deployment of staff and resources, but the Nordic delegations had serious difficulties with many of the Advisory Committee's recommendations for reductions, for instance those concerning the activities of UNHCR. They also found it difficult to accept both the proposed cuts relating to the strengthening of the Centre for Human Rights and the overall cuts under section 2, in particular those affecting research and the collection of information. In addition, they found it hard to accept the substantial cuts proposed by the Advisory Committee under sections 33 D, 33 E and 35, because the maintenance and improvement activities concerned were usually financially rewarding in the long run.

44. The Advisory Committee's proposal for a cut of $15 million across the board, on the basis of so-called balances of unobligated appropriations and unliquidated obligations (A/46/7, para. 22), was debatable. A thorough discussion of the various questions which it raised was needed. The Nordic delegations would also like to hear the views of representatives of the Secretary-General on that kind of approach and on the effects of such cuts.

45. The United Nations budget had become considerably leaner in recent years and, by some calculations, the Organization now had slightly less funds available in real terms than 10 years previously. There was also a new budget procedure which ensured better preparation and tighter scrutiny of budget proposals. Against that background, the Nordic countries did not think that a zero growth rate for the budget should be the aim at a time when new tasks were constantly being entrusted to the Organization. It was extremely important that the United Nations should be able to respond to changing political needs and circumstances.

46. Voluntary funding could not provide an answer to the Organization's financial problems. Extrabudgetary funds based largely on voluntary financing had increased considerably over the years. Extrabudgetary funding was also

(Mr. Kääria, Finland)

increasing in areas formerly wholly financed from assessed contributions to the regular budget. That trend should not be allowed to continue because the financing of United Nations activities must have the much more solid basis which only assessed contributions could provide. The increasing demand for voluntary contributions would inevitably raise the question of sharing the burden of financing the United Nations more equitably among its Member States. Moreover, there was a need for greater transparency in matters connected with the use of extrabudgetary funds linked to regularly financed activities. The Nordic delegations were looking forward to the Secretary-General's report on the use of extrabudgetary resources.

47. The Nordic countries were the largest contributors to the United Nations system per capita, providing substantial amounts for various voluntary funds and programmes and paying more than 30 per cent of the budgets of UNDP and UNICEF. They were ready to play a constructive part in solving the problems confronting the Committee, which included not only budgetary issues proper but, perhaps more importantly, such questions as the full and timely payment of assessed contributions and the means of providing the resources required.

The meeting rose at 12.35 p.m.

UNITED NATIONS

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FORTY-SIXTH SESSION

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FIFTH COMMITTEE
10th meeting
held on
Thursday, 17 October 1991
at 10 a.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 10th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. MUNTHASSER (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya)

Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. MSELLE

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AGENDA ITEM 107: PROPOSED PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1992-1993 (continued)

AGENDA ITEM 108: PROGRAMME PLANNING (continued)

General debate (continued)

AGENDA ITEM 112: JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

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91-56624 3969S (E)

Distr. GENERAL
A/C.5/46/SR.10
21 October 1991

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

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The meeting was called to order at 10.35 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 107: PROPOSED PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1992-1993 (continued) (A/46/6/Rev.1 and A/46/7)

AGENDA ITEM 108: PROGRAMME PLANNING (continued) (A/46/16 and Add.1, A/46/173 and A/46/330)

General debate (continued)

1. Mr. HOLTHE (Norway), speaking on the item on programme planning on behalf of the five Nordic countries, said that those countries attached great importance to the programme planning system and intended to take an active part in future work on the medium-term plan, which was the only comprehensive document covering the aims and activities mandated by Member States that were to be implemented by the Organization. In recent years, a stronger linkage had been established between the medium-term plan and the programme budget. With regard to the latter, the Nordic countries shared the concern of the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) over the lack of involvement by intergovernmental bodies in relevant programmes and hoped to see them take a more active part in future budget processes. They also wished to stress the need to examine more closely the implications of extrabudgetary resources for the plan.

2. The report of the Secretary-General on the methodology for monitoring and reporting the programme performance of the United Nations (A/46/173) proposed some changes that would clearly improve the previous methodology. The need for Member States to be informed about the implementation of programmes was indisputable, but views differed on how that could best be done. The Nordic countries did not believe that suspending the issuance of the performance report pending adoption of a new methodology, as some suggested, was the most rational way to deal with the shortcomings of the current system. Instead, they favoured a continuing dialogue on how to improve it and regarded the report of the Secretary-General as an important contribution to that process. They would be attentive to any more far-reaching ideas but would not support a suspension of the performance report as that would imply that there was no need to review resource utilization.

3. With regard to the specific proposals put forward by the Secretary-General, the Nordic countries noted that the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) did not disapprove of them and they supported its view that the aim should be to produce a simplified report. The proposals were reasonable and welcome, since they were likely to improve the reporting of programme performance and thus make the task of monitoring it more rewarding.

4. With regard to the programme budget implications arising from the report of CPC on the work of its thirty-first session (A/46/16/Add.1), he noted that the Advisory Committee took the view, in paragraph 87 of its report (A/46/7),

(Mr. Holthe, Norway)

that none of the recommendations would give rise to the need for additional appropriations, yet CPC stated, in paragraph 5 of its report, that revised estimates would be prepared and submitted to the General Assembly.

5. Referring to paragraph 6 of the CPC report, which stated that the Secretary-General would make arrangements to respond to the recommendation by CPC that a separate and identifiable unit should be established within the Office of the Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation to undertake those activities that fell within its responsibility as proposed under programme 45 of the medium-term plan, he said that the Nordic countries supported that recommendation.

6. Mr. DUHALT (Mexico) said that he wished to refer to three general aspects of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993: the total amount, the distribution of resources, and the methodology by which it had been prepared.

7. With regard to the first point, the General Assembly had been making great efforts in recent years to achieve more efficient utilization of the Organization's financial resources and it was one of the Committee's main tasks to rationalize the budget exercise. It would be dangerous, however, not to draw a distinction between discipline and excessive rigidity. The budget was intended to ensure that the United Nations had the necessary resources to tackle current international problems properly. The attempt to make United Nations activities conform to rigid, preconceived budgetary criteria was therefore worrying, since that could virtually immobilize the Organization. It would be even more serious if there were attempts to make a specific rate of growth a prior condition for Member States to meet their legal financial obligations.

8. The projected real growth rate in the proposed programme budget was acceptable. His delegation had noted the recommendations made by the Advisory Committee to reduce projected expenditures by some $43 million and appreciated the efforts that it had made. It was too early, however, to decide on the advisability of the proposed reductions, each of which would have to be examined when the various sections of the budget were considered. Many of the proposals for reductions were based on the levels of resources not disbursed in earlier budgetary exercises, but his delegation was not convinced that unobligated appropriations and unliquidated obligations should be treated alike and would like further explanations from the Advisory Committee on that aspect of its proposals.

9. At its previous session, the General Assembly had agreed on five areas that were to be given priority in the preparation of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993. His delegation considered, however, that the proposed distribution of resources for that biennium did not duly reflect the priority accorded by the General Assembly to economic development activities in developing countries. That had been evident at the latest session of CPC, when various delegations had disagreed with the negative real

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growth rates in the sections on the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the Centre for Science and Technology for Development. His delegation hoped for a fair and reasonable solution to that problem when the individual sections of the proposed programme budget were discussed.

10. With regard to the methodology for preparing the budget, his delegation appreciated the efforts made to link its structure with that of the medium-term plan. However, it was still necessary to make improvements in the methodology that would facilitate the analysis of biennial budgets. One such improvement would be to change the method of calculating growth rates between successive budgetary exercises. His delegation welcomed the recommendation by CPC (A/46/16, para. 49) that an ad hoc technical seminar should be convened to review questions of methodology, because improving the current methodology would have beneficial effects both for the Secretariat and for Member States.

11. In conclusion, he wished to echo the Secretary-General's concern about the amount owed to the Organization by certain Member States. It had been repeatedly demonstrated that the performance of the United Nations could be seriously affected by its lack of resources to carry out the activities mandated by Member States. Excessive budgetary rigidity and the repeated failure of some countries to pay their assessed contributions constituted serious threats to the Organization's financial health.

12. Mr. BROTODININGRAT (Indonesia) said that his delegation shared the deep concern of the Secretary-General and the Chairman of the Advisory Committee over the discrepancy between the enhanced role of the United Nations and its limited resources. Higher priority should be given to finding ways whereby Member States could help to resolve the Organization's financial crisis once and for all. Those ways might include outlawing the deliberate withholding of payments to the Organization, closing the loophole in Article 19 of the Charter that had encouraged the accumulation of perennial arrears, and establishing a working capital fund to cover simple cases of payments that were late for purely technical reasons.

13. With regard to the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993, he said that his delegation was encouraged by the progress that had been made in involving the intergovernmental bodies responsible for programme budgeting at important stages of its preparation. It was, however, disquieting to note that, for most sections of the budget, programmes of work had not been reviewed by the competent sectoral bodies. His delegation agreed with the comment by CPC in paragraph 30 of its report (A/46/16) that such reviews should become systematic and that all intergovernmental bodies should fulfil their role during the implementation of the programme budget.

14. The rates of growth in the proposed programme budget had given rise to controversy about its relationship with the programme budget outline. His delegation tended to agree with the view expressed by the Chairman of ACABQ in his introductory statement that, under current budgetary procedure, the

(Mr. Brotodiningrat, Indonesia)

outline was not an absolute ceiling, but a preliminary indication of resources. On the more technical question of whether, as stated in paragraph 1 of the proposed programme budget (A/46/6/Rev.1), the requested amount was within the preliminary estimate provided by the outline, he could not understand the calculations adduced in support of that statement. His delegation was therefore unable to assess not only the budgetary calculations but also the programmatic significance of the proposed growth, and it would welcome further clarification on the subject from the Secretariat.

15. With regard to the proposed allocation of resources, he noted that the pattern was similar to that of the revised appropriations for the previous biennium, but with some noticeable differences. The first such difference was the dwindling share allocated to peace-keeping activities, precisely at a time when the role of the United Nations in that area was expected to increase. It was to be hoped that the reduction in resources would not hamper the implementation of projected activities. A second difference was the substantial real growth accorded to the section on human rights, which was presumably intended in part to accommodate increasing activities in preparation for the World Conference on Human Rights. If that were so, he wondered why the section for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development showed negative real growth when increased activities were also expected in that area. His delegation was pleased to note the above-average real growth of 2 per cent proposed for the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, but pointed out that a substantial part of the growth was attributable to non-recurrent items and that the overall budget was still below that for all other regional commissions except one. Finally, his delegation echoed the Advisory Committee's call, in paragraph 28 of its report (A/46/7), for stricter controls on staff travel costs.

16. The new programme budgeting process had produced some welcome improvements in setting priorities, but many priority subprogrammes in the economic and social sector, in particular, had not been allocated increased resources. His delegation hoped that such subprogrammes would have the first claim on available resources when the programme budget was implemented. It also considered that it was the prerogative of Member States to set priorities. It was therefore incumbent upon intergovernmental bodies, including sectoral bodies, to make every effort to determine the priorities to be reflected in the programme budget.

17. The increasingly important part being played by extrabudgetary resources was a welcome indication of the revival of multilateralism, but it raised a number of problems. The first was a fear that extrabudgetary activities would distort the Organization's priorities. Experience at the regional level, however, had shown that, far from distorting priorities, extrabudgetary resources had played an important supplementary role in the implementation of priority programmes and activities that lacked support from the regular budget. A second problem was the alleged lack of transparency in presenting, managing and reporting the use of such resources. In that connection, the

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recommendations made by the Joint Inspection Unit in its report on the subject (JIU/REP/90/3) deserved serious consideration in the quest for a solution. A third problem was the increasingly heavy burden of support costs imposed on the Secretariat and the regular budget by extrabudgetary operations. In that regard, there was merit in the Advisory Committee's proposal regarding the establishment of guidelines to ensure that such costs were adequately reimbursed.

18. The experience of the past decade had shown not only that a leaner Organization was a healthier one, but also that the Organization could only function effectively if Member States were committed to making it do so. As expectations of the United Nations mounted, the arbitrary concept of zero real growth could no longer serve to enforce budgetary discipline. It would render the Organization ineffectual and might well be counter-productive.

19. Mr. OSELLA (Argentina) said that the methodology for the preparation of the budget was complex in that the budget document reflected the complicated structure and interrelationship between the Organization's activities. The proposal by CPC regarding the convening of an ad hoc technical seminar (A/46/16, para. 49) should lead to improvements in the budget preparation process. Revision of the methodology would facilitate calculation of the growth rate, as well as a comparison of successive budgets and clarify the relationship between the budget and the medium-term plan. The seminar could usefully consider the definition of the various concepts, such as the distinction between recurrent and non-recurrent expenditures, employed in the preparation of the budget, and endeavour to suggest improvements.

20. The format of the budget was a major element in improving understanding of the budget document. In that connection, his delegation noted that similar activities appeared under various budget sections, activities which should obviously have been grouped together. CPC had expressed similar concerns, and had called for the submission of a new budget format at the forty-seventh session.

21. The preparation of the budget for the biennium 1992-1993 within the framework of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 should facilitate a direct follow-on from programming to implementation of activities. The priorities indicated in the medium-term plan constituted the basis for the allocation of resources. The inclusion of activities to deal with new problems should not result in any neglect of existing problems.

22. The real growth rate of 0.9 per cent was of concern to his delegation. Resources must be allocated efficiently so as to avoid budget increases that would lead to revisions in the contributions of Member States. His delegation would give favourable consideration to the budget reductions proposed by the Advisory Committee in its report (A/46/7).

23. He noted with concern the changes to the staffing table proposed by the Secretary-General, in that reclassification of posts was not conducted

(Mr. Osella, Argentina)

uniformly under all budget sections. That suggested that reclassification might be little more than disguised promotion. All reclassifications should be fully justified. In that connection, he endorsed the comments of CPC concerning the refinement of the procedures used to evaluate workloads (A/46/16, para. 42).

24. The availability of extrabudgetary resources, which practically doubled the total amount of resources available, made it possible to implement various programmes and activities. The allocation of such resources should, however, follow the priorities adopted under General Assembly resolution 45/253. In that connection, his delegation looked forward to the report on the use of extrabudgetary resources requested under resolution 45/254.

25. His Government supported the new role of the United Nations in the changed international political environment, and accepted the financial responsibilities that would be incumbent upon it as a Member of the Organization.

26. Mr. AYEWAH (Nigeria) said that, in resolution 45/253, the General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General, in preparing the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993, to pay particular attention to the maintenance of international peace and security, the economic development of developing countries, the economic recovery and development of Africa, the environment, and international drug control. The economic development of developing countries and the economic recovery and development of Africa would, however, be adversely affected by the negative growth recorded under sections 15 and 18 of the budget.

27. His delegation was surprised to note that programme 45 of the medium-term plan (Africa: critical economic situation, recovery and development) had been included under subsection 11.A of the programme budget (Office of the Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation), instead of under the Department of Public Information and the Economic Commission for Africa, which had full responsibility for the activities concerned. It called for the establishment of a separate unit in the Office of the Director-General for Development and International Economic Cooperation to undertake activities under programme 45 of the medium-term plan.

28. The 2.7 per cent real growth under section 23 of the budget (Economic Commission for Africa) did not reflect the high priority accorded to ECA by the General Assembly. Most ECA activities were heavily dependent on extrabudgetary funding. Following the formation of the African Economic Community, there was an imperative need for adequate resources to enable United Nations organs to support the Community's objectives. In that connection, full funding should be provided for the African Institute for Economic Planning and Development. His delegation endorsed the remarks of the Advisory Committee that requisite resources should be provided to the multinational programming and operational centres (MULPOCs) (A/46/7,

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para. 23.12). Moreover, urgent action was required to implement the request by the General Assembly, in resolution 45/248 B, for the revival of a training programme for translators/précis-writers at ECA.

29. With regard to the Advisory Committee's recommendation on the reduction of travel expenses under section 7 of the budget (Elimination of apartheid), he said that any such step would be detrimental to the work of the Special Committee against Apartheid, which was constrained to convene meetings at various venues in order to promote a speedy end to apartheid. Similarly, his delegation did not support the Advisory Committee's recommendation against the reclassification of a Legal Officer post from P-4 to P-5 in connection with the United Nations Decade of International Law (A/46/7, para. 9.10).

30. In view of the changing role of the United Nations and the expectations of Member States, a zero-growth budget was not feasible, and his delegation supported the real increase of 0.9 per cent in the proposed budget for the biennium 1992-1993.

31. With regard to programme planning, his delegation supported the CPC recommendation for the convening of an ad hoc technical seminar. It also believed that the programmatic analysis in the introduction to the budget should be improved and that the budget format should be restructured in order to provide greater transparency and promote the optimum use of resources with more flexibility.

32. Lastly, his delegation would welcome an improvement in the timely issuance of documentation, since delays in issuance had hampered the work of some Committees.

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33. The CHAIRMAN said that, in an endeavour to accommodate the views of members of the Committee on the work of the Joint Inspection Unit, he wished to suggest that the Committee should consider the substantive reports of JIU in connection with the agenda items to which they related. He also suggested that a draft decision should be formulated to the effect that the Committee took note of the work programme of JIU for 1991 and would conduct an in-depth discussion of the item at the forty-seventh session. If he heard no objection, he would take it that the Committee wished to proceed in that manner.

34. It was so decided.

35. Mr. QUIJANO (Chairman of the Joint Inspection Unit), introducing the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) (A/46/34), said that the report before the Committee differed from previous reports in that new material, particularly on the development of future programmes of work and implementation of the relevant General Assembly resolutions and JIU recommendations, had been added. JIU believed that providing more substantive

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information on ongoing, prospective and follow-up work would facilitate dialogue with the General Assembly and the legislative bodies of the JIU participating organizations, so that the Unit could focus more systematically on changing priorities and needs. The change in emphasis reflected the wish of the General Assembly that the JIU should give greater attention to management, budgetary and administrative issues, areas in which the Unit had steadily increased its work over the past three years. Recent reports had included a comparative analysis of budgeting in the United Nations system, the introduction of optical disc systems, procurement for technical cooperation projects, extrabudgetary resources, and some personnel issues. JIU would continue to seek out new areas of activity in coordination with ACABQ and intensify its cooperation with auditors and evaluation units in the various organizations. It would pay particular attention to the process of reform and renewal in the United Nations, as reflected in General Assembly resolution 41/213.

36. Part two of the report before the Committee reviewed the development of evaluation systems since the late 1970s, during which period substantial progress had been made in establishing internal evaluation systems. The Inspectors now believed, however, that the Unit's work on evaluation methodology was largely complete and that the time had come to focus more on practical evaluation work, particularly in the management, budgetary and administrative areas. The JIU report contained a number of suggestions in that regard.

37. It was the task of JIU to promote greater cooperation and coordination between organizations. In that connection, it had prepared a set of reports, including one on the coordination of activities related to early warning of possible refugee flows. There was also at present renewed interest in coordination in such areas as operational activities for development and JIU was, accordingly, conducting studies on cooperation between the United Nations system and the multilateral financial institutions; decentralization; the UNDP round-table process; and issues relating to cooperation between the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations.

38. The report before the Committee set forth ideas for further improvement of the work of JIU, as requested by the General Assembly in recent years. Thus, a more detailed commentary had been included on the implementation of the Unit's previous recommendations. The Inspectors would continue such reporting in future reports, and would make special efforts to ensure timely consideration of the Unit's reports by the legislative bodies concerned; that was essential if the reports were to serve a useful purpose.

39. He noted that JIU was involved in a major change in its activities in terms of programming, follow-up, cooperation with bodies such as ACABQ, CPC and the Board of Auditors, and improvement of the Unit's working methods. It had already defined plans for the use of computer technology to conduct research and analysis, produce reports and develop a management information

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system for the purposes of follow-up, planning and cross-reference. The success of those efforts would largely depend on the Committee's support and on action to implement paragraph 3 of General Assembly resolution 45/237, which called for the enhancement of the research and analytical capacity of JIU. In that connection, its limited staffing was proving increasingly inadequate, given the nature and scope of the work of JIU.

The meeting rose at 12.10 p.m.